

On Lithuania, Bush Must Juggle Support For Both Gorbachev, Self-Determination

WASHINGTON INSIGHT

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WASHINGTON — For six months, George Bush has collected victories in the Cold War without having to do much to earn them. Communist regimes were toppled across Eastern Europe without much help from the U.S.

But now that Lithuania is seeking to carry the East bloc self-determination movement inside the borders of the Soviet Union, the president's job isn't so easy any more. Mr. Bush has to struggle to sustain his two major foreign-policy themes: support for the democratic surge in territories ruled by Moscow, and cheerleading for Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, whose recent decrees appear aimed at preventing the uprising from penetrating his borders.

When Mr. Bush meets Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze at the White House in a few days, he has to find a way to reconcile those two roles without appearing to sell out little Lithuania.

Last week, when a reporter tried to force the president's hand by asking him how the U.S. would respond to a crackdown, Mr. Bush reacted sharply. "Too hypothetical; stop right there," the president barked. "I am not going to make an answer to a hypothetical question of that nature. What possible good could come from the president of the United States, standing halfway around the world, speculating on something that he doesn't want to see happen? I mean, I could inadvertently cause something bad to happen."

Eager to preserve warm relations with Mr. Gorbachev, the U.S. administration has declined to recognize Lithuania's declaration of independence, despite urgent requests from Vilnius and a 40-year U.S. policy of refusing to recognize the Soviet annexation of Lithuania and the other Baltic republics. After a few days last week of expressing concern about Soviet intimidation, the U.S. toned down its public comments for fear of provoking trouble.

And, even in private communications between Secretary of State James Baker and Mr. Shevardnadze—a face-to-face

meeting in Africa and a cable last week—the U.S. has taken great care to avoid spelling out what a crackdown in Lithuania would cost Mr. Gorbachev in terms of relations with the U.S.

The president's own letter to Mr. Gorbachev late last week appears to have been similarly careful. "The president's message to President Gorbachev simply reaffirmed our position as stated many times," White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater said. He added that it "clearly stated [the president's] support and the American support for the aspirations of the Lithuanian people for self-determination"—a statement that clearly isn't the same as backing the immediate independence the Lithuanians have declared.

Mr. Bush himself said the letter was sent because "I want to be sure that the Soviets understand our position and understand that we are not trying to make things difficult for Lithuania or for the Soviet Union or anybody else."

There are three major reasons for this caution. First, administration officials are convinced Mr. Gorbachev will let Lithuania go peacefully, so long as it can be done gradually, on Moscow's terms. Second, they argue privately that the politically inexperienced Lithuanian leaders erred by quickly declaring independence, rather than entering talks with Moscow under Soviet law.

The president himself said recently: "There are certain realities in life, the Lithuanians are well aware of them, and they should talk, as they are, with the Soviet officials."

Finally, and most importantly, Mr. Bush and Mr. Baker privately admire Mikhail Gorbachev and are convinced they are within a few months of concluding important business with him—a vast scaling down of Soviet military power, an agreement to unite Germany on Western terms, and an opportunity to open the U.S.S.R. to market-based investment.

This is by far the touchiest moment for foreign policy in the Bush presidency. If the conflict in Lithuania settles down into negotiations without an armed crackdown, the Bush-Baker approach will look brilliant. If not, the president will be accused of selling out a small, budding democracy to further big-power goals.